

ALEXANDRE

Will Barnet: My Father's House

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Stephen May

BEVERLY, MASS

Will Barnet, the 93-year-old artist whose paintings and prints have for decades defined him as a major American artist, is the subject of an exhibition at the art college in his hometown, Montserrat College of Art. The exhibition, "Will Barnet: My Father's House," curated by Montserrat Gallery Director Katherine French, focuses on his work - much of it never before shown. It features paintings, drawings and prints dating from 1937 through 1992 and is on view through November 23. The exhibition focuses on Barnet's sense of family and memories of Beverly.

Over the course of a productive career spanning more than seven decades, Will Barnet has made his mark as an innovative painter, pioneering printmaker and respected teacher. Still going strong, he is The Grand Old Man of American Art.

Gentle and generous, Barnet is admired for his qualities as a human being, as well as an artist. He is acclaimed by generations of students and art observers for his adherence to classical traditions of order, harmony and stability, as well as his commitment to experimental forms of portraiture and genre.

Drawing on a wide range of influences, including El Greco, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Daumier, Cézanne, Eakins, Kandinsky, Léger, Picasso, Hartley, Dove and Stuart Davis, plus Byzantine and Native American art, over the years his work has ranged from the Social Realism of the 1930s to Indian Space abstractions in the 40s and 50s to the domestic figuration of recent decades.

"Although the range of Barnet's accomplishments is vast, his entire body of work is unified by the artist's sacred devotion to classical principles of order, stability, harmony and grace," according to Gail Stavitsky, chief curator at The Montclair Art Museum. She organized an outstanding retrospective, "Will Barnet" A Timeless World," that toured in 2000-2001.

One of America's most important living artists, Barnet has collected boatloads of honors and awards. He is an Academician of the National Academy of Design and a member of The American Academy of Arts and Letters. He is represented in such prestigious collections as the Guggenheim Museum; Metropolitan Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum of Modern Art; National Gallery of Art; Vatican Museum and Whitney Museum of American Art, as well as the Farnsworth Art Museum and Portland Museum of Art in Maine. Barnet's work has been the subject of more than 100 solo exhibitions in museums and galleries.

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Born in coastal Beverly, just north of Boston, in 1911, Barnet was the youngest of four children of Russian immigrant parents. He gained his work ethic from his father, who labored long hours as a machinist in a Beverly shoe factory. From his mother he learned a sensitivity to people. The Barnet household was enlivened by dogs, cats and talking parrots, who appear often in Barnet's art.

Growing up in a port city, with historic Salem nearby, he was exposed to a handsome and rich colonial environment proud of its patriotic heritage and maritime traditions. A precocious youngster, he read widely in American history, world literature and art history and made art in a "studio" in the family cellar.

As a teenager he received solid training in the disciplines of French academic art while studying under Impressionist painter Philip Leslie Hale at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Copying works of the Old Masters, especially Rembrandt and Daumier, "reinforced Barnet's socially conscious interests in the human condition," says Stavitsky.

Concluding that, as he put it, "Boston was too small," at 18 Barnet set out for New York bent on a career as an artist. He began a half-century association with the Art Students League as a student in 1930. Among his teachers were Thomas Hart Benton and Stuart Davis. Jackson Pollock was a fellow student.

A largely self-taught master printer by age 23, Barnet became the youngest instructor of graphic arts ever at the ASL, where he taught until 1981. By all accounts an effective, demanding, humane and unfailingly helpful instructor, Barnet became, according to Stavitsky, "one of the best and most influential teachers in America." Among his prominent pupils were Audrey Flack, Eva Hesse, Donald Judd, James Rosenquist, Mark Rothko, Cy Twombly and Tom Wesselman.

Barnet was also on the faculty at Cooper Union, Yale, Cornell and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

The style and content of Barnet's early lithographic work, created at the onset of the Great Depression, reflected his keen interest in Daumier's social satire and the massive forms of Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco's socially engaged work. His output also drew on his lifelong fascination with people going about the activities of everyday life. Throughout his career Barnet has demonstrated a rare ability to transform the reality of the human experience into affirmations of the beauty and even heroic dignity of life.

In what he called "social statements" in the 1930s, he conveyed the violence of the time in Orozco-influenced lithographs such as "Conflict," 1934, and captured the tragic fate of individuals ground down during the Depression in paintings like "Idle Hands," 1935, a simple and moving image of a slumped over, dejected man in a slouch cap.

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In 1935 Barnet married Mary Sinclair, who was to become mother of their two sons. That same year he had his first solo exhibition at New York's Eighth Street Playhouse.

While working on a WPA project in the 1940s, Barnet met Mexican mural painters Orozco and Diego Rivera, who introduced him to the formal beauty of Indian art. In the late 1940s and 50s Barnet was associated with the Indian Space Painters, notably Steve Wheeler, a group of American modernists who combined avant-garde techniques with two-dimensional motifs from Native American art, with some Surrealist touches.

Rejecting the raw painterly approach of Abstract Expressionism and seeking to break away from European influences, Barnet found special inspiration in the art of the Indians of the Northwest Coast and of the Southwest. He was "struck by...the ability of Native American artists to use abstract designs that projected dynamic movement, balance and emotion in positive space," according to Twig Johnson, curator of Native American Art at The Montclair Art Museum.

This Indian art inspiration led to a series of linear pictographs, abstracted from natural forms, filled with colorful and appealing, albeit often enigmatic, images. These tightly orchestrated paintings, characterized by beautifully worked out biomorphic and geometric forms, organized into a harmonious balance, bear such titles as "Self-Portrait," 1948-49 and 1953-54; and "Fourth of July," 1954. Some observers feel that these large canvases, with their successful assimilation of Indian influences into highly contemporary painting modes, are the works for which Barnet will be best remembered.

Divorced from his first wife, in 1953 Barnet married Lithuanian-born Elena Ciurlys, who became his devoted muse and partner.

Images of his handsome wife, with her distinctive almond-shaped eyes, his comely brunette daughter, Ona, and eventually her growing children have played major roles in Barnet's oeuvre over the succeeding half century. Many of these paintings have been translated into widely admired prints.

While some critics were uneasy about the combinations of abstraction and representation in Barnet's work, many observers applauded their formal restraint, perceptiveness and sophistication. "Throughout his career," wrote Farnsworth director Christopher Crosman in a 2002 exhibition catalog, "Barnet has retained a strong abstract sensibility through reductive, flattened forms and exquisitely balanced compositions. He was...among the first and few artists to successfully take on one of the great dilemmas of modernism: that is, the seamless union of a classically formal language of abstraction combined with deeply human and poetic

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content - content that is widely accessible to people of all backgrounds and levels of interest in art."

While spending all his professional life in Manhattan, New England has always been in Barnet's thoughts. He has summered in Maine for years and returned frequently to Beverly to look in on his last remaining, aging sister Eva, who lived on in the house where they all grew up. Haunted by memories of departed family members, she led a reclusive existence filled with anxiety and hallucinations.

Barnet's visits prompted a series of somber, rather ghostly, works that evoked the isolated life and hermetic environment in which his sister lived. In these images Barnet sought, as he put it, to "capture the interior emotions of my family's existence, my relationship to them, as well as the atmosphere of the house, rooms and abstract sense of light."

The Montserrat exhibition focuses on a series of paintings completed after the deaths of his sisters in the early 1990s, in which Barnet explores his feelings of profound loss. The works capture the interior emotions of his family's existence and his relationship to them, as well as the atmosphere of the house, rooms and abstract sense of light. The accompanying drawings range in date from the early 1930s to the 1990s. Many serve as studies for later paintings. All prints in the exhibit are from 1937 and depict Barnet's father resting after a hard day's work.

In the painting "My Father's House," Barnet depicted his sister Eva standing behind a screened door, reluctant to step out onto the porch. Above her, windows glow with visions of a family who have returned to spend time together.

The exhibition is the result of a two-year collaboration between the artist and French, who worked directly with Barnet, conducting interviews and curating the exhibit with work from his own collection. Although much of it had been stored away and had not been seen by the artist or his wife since the 1940s and 1950s, the paintings have been exhibited once, during a very brief show in New York. This is the first time all these works have appeared together.

While exhibiting extensively in New York and in Europe, Barnet has not exhibited work on the North Shore since a retrospective exhibition at the Essex Institute in 1980. This handsome exhibition underscores what a living treasure Will Barnet is, and why he is one of the finest artists in Twentieth Century American art.

A 27-page color catalog is available for purchase for \$20 from the Montserrat Gallery Office, 978-921-4242, ext 1204. The museum is at 23 Essex Street.

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